Luther's Letter to Bishop Schultz

From De Wette, *Dr. Martin Luthers Briefe*, Erster Theil, 112 (No. 66)

Reverendissimo in Christo Patri ac Domino, Domino Hieronymo, Ecclesiae Brandenburgensis Episcopo, clementissimo Domino suo, in primis gratioso.

Jesus.

Salutem. Cum nuper circum nostras regiones, optime Praesul, audiri caepissent nova et inaudita de apostolicis indulgentiis dogmata, ita ut tam docti quam indocti plurimi passim admirarentur et moverentur: fui ego a multis tum familiaribus, tum ignotis facie, rogatus multis [literis] et colloquiis, quid mihi de ista verborum novitate (ne dicam licentia) videretur. Dissimulabam aliquandiu: tandem urgebant disputationibus acribus usque ad periculum pontificalis reverentiae.

Ego vero quid facerem? Non erat meum in hac re quidquam statuere, et verebar illis contradicere, quos non nisi vera praedicasse cupiebam videri quam maxime: isti vero sic instabant evidentibus argumentis falsa et inania probare, ut me (vera fateor) omnino captivarent atque concluderent.

Ut ergo utrisque satisfacerem, visum est id optimum consilium, utriusque neque consentire neque dissentire, sed interea de tanta re disputare, donec Ecclesia sancta statueret, quid sentiendum foret. Itaque emisi disputationem, invitans et rogans publice omnes, privatim vero, ut novi, quosque doctissimos, ut vel per literas suam sententiam aperirent: quandoquidem in iis rebus neque Scripturas, neque doctores ecclesiasticos, neque ipsos canones, praeter paucos canonistas, et hos sine textu loquentes, et aliquot scholasticos doctores similiter opinantes, nihil etiam probantes, refragari [alternate reading from the Weimar Ed. is taken] mihi viderem.

Mihi id sane omnium absurdissimum videtur, aliquid scilicet in Ecclesia Dei praedicari et audiri, quod cum haeretici expostulaverint, unde rationem reddamus, et nos non possimus, Christum et Ecclesiam eius relinquamus illis

To the Most Reverend Father and Lord in Christ, Lord Jerome, Bishop of the Church of Brandenburg, his most clement lord, particularly gracious.

Jesus.

Greetings. When recently all around our regions, best prelate, new and unheard of doctrines concerning apostolic indulgences had begun to be heard so that as many learned as the multitude of unlearned were surprised and stirred: I was asked by many friends, and by those unknown [to me] by face, in many letters and discussions, what seemed good to me concerning that novelty (not to say license) of words. I was concealed for some time: eventually they pressured [me] by continuous pointed disputes towards the danger of papal reverence.

Truly, what was I to do? It was not mine to establish anything in this matter, and I was dreading to contradict those [i.e. those in favor of indulgences indulgences] whom I desired to appear to have greatly preached nothing but the truth: truly others [i.e. their opponents] were pursuing in proving their teachings false and inane by clear arguments, so that (I confess the truth) they captivated me and shut me up.

Therefore, so that I might render satisfaction to each side, it seemed the best advice, neither to agree nor disagree with either, but to meanwhile dispute on such a great matter, until the holy Church might decide, what was to be thought. And so I sent out the disputation, inviting and asking for all publicly, in truth, [also] in private, to those I thought of as the most learned ones, so that their opinion could be revealed through writing: since in these matters I appeared to myself to have opposition expressed in neither the Scriptures, nor ecclesiastical doctors, nor the canons themselves, (besides a few canonists, and these speaking without a framework, and several scholastic teachers who were opining similarly, yet also without proving anything).

Reasonably to me it seems the most absurd of all things that something is proclaimed and heard in the Church of God, which we are not able to deliver a reason for, when heretics challenge it; we abandon Christ and his Church to

ridiculum et ludibrium.

Porro scholasticis doctoribus et canonistis constat, nullam deberi a nobis fidem, dum suas opinantur opiniones, et ut vulgo dicitur: turpe est juristam loqui sine textu: at multo turpius est, theologum loqui sine textu, non Aristotelis dico (nam hunc plus, valde, nimis, satis loquuntur) sed nostro, id est, Scripturae sacrae, canonum, ecclesiasticorum patrum.

Proinde mihi visum est, rem hanc esse mei studii et officii, disputare scilicet de rebus omnium dubiosissimis, sed simul, si falsae sint, periculosissimis assertu: quando hucusque licitum est scholasticis, de iis etiam rebus sacratissimis reverendisque, quas per tot saecula nullus dubitavit Christianus, disputare.

Quod vero humilis et dejecta eorum sit religio seu reverentia, qui de potestate ecclesiastica seu summi Pontificis putent non disputandum, sed tacendum et gratias agendum, quis non vel palpet, quaeso? cur non etiam tacent et gratias agunt, et suas frivolas disputationes omittunt de potestate at sapientia et bonitate eius, qui dedit istam potestatem Ecclesias? Denique quid est iam secretum, vel in illa summa majestate vel sacratissima humanitate, quod non prope nugis ita contaminaverint, ut omnium paene et affectum et reverentiam cordium assiduitate nugandi in Deum extinxerint? Sed de hoc alias.

Igitur cum in hanc arenam vocarem omnes, veniret vero nullus, deinde viderem disputationes meas latius vagari, quam volueram, atque passim, non ut disputabilia, sed asserta acciperentur: coactus sum praeter spem et votum, meam infantiam et ignorantiam in vulgus mittere, et declarationes ac probationes earum in publicum edere, satius ratus me facere, si imperitiae meae infamiam incurrerem, quam illos errare sinerem, qui forte putant omnia esse asserta. Inter quae sunt, de quibus dubito, nonnulla ignoro, aliqua et nego, nulla vero pertinaciter assero, sed omnia Ecclesiae sanctae suoque judicio submitto.

Cum vero tu, optime Praesul, nobis per misericordiam Christi datus sis huius loci Ordinarius (ut vocant), qui quidem bonos et eruditos non modo diligis mirifice, quod in multis multi plurimum praedicant, verum pro tua singulari humanitate et humilitate prope usque ad

their ridicule and mockery.

To the scholastic teachers and canonists of old it is established that no faith is owed from us, while they opine their opinions, and as it is commonly said: "it is a disgrace that a jurist speaks without a text": yet it is far more disgraceful that a theologian speaks without a text, I do not mean Aristotle (for they speak of him plenty, powerfully, exceedingly, and enough) but ours, that is, of sacred Scripture, canons, and the Church Fathers.

So then it seemed to me that this matter was of my zeal and office, namely, to dispute on matters most uncertain of all, but also at the same time, if they would be false, most dangerous to assert: for up until now it was permitted for scholastics, to dispute even on those matters most holy and revered which no Christian doubted throughout all the ages.

Truly, I ask, to whom is it not palpable how humble and subdued their religion and reverence is, who believe the power of the Church or of the supreme Pontiff not to be disputed, but to be passed over and for thanks to be given? Moreover, why are they not silent and give thanks, and set aside their frivolous disputations on power and, moreover, wisdom and goodness of Him, who gave that power to the churches? And so, what is there still hidden, in either that highest majesty or most holy human nature, which has not been thus almost corrupted by trifles, so that they might have nearly extinguished both the affection and reverence of every heart by the constant presence of trifling in God? But more on this in another place.

Therefore, when I summoned everyone into this arena [*arena*], truly no one would come; then I saw that my disputations wandered more widely, than I had wanted, and were taken in everywhere, not as disputable, but as assertions: I was forced beyond anticipation and undertaking, to send into the common people my infantile speech and ignorance, and to publish their declarations and proofs in public, having thought it was preferable that I acted, [even] if I would incur infamy [*infamia*] in my inexperience, than having allowed others to err, who by accident thought that everything was asserted. Among which [theses] there are those, concerning which I am uncertain of, several I disregard, and others I deny, truly not one do I tenaciously assert, but submit everything to the holy Church and her judgment.

Since truly you, best Prelate, were given to us through the mercy of Christ as the ordinary of this place (as they call it), you who indeed wonderfully and not lightly hold dear the good and learned, which many greatly proclaim in many accounts, but truly on behalf of your singular kindness and

periculum pontificalis dignitatis etiam veneraris et colis (facessat adulatio, non te, sed Christi dona in te praedico): justissimum fuit, ut tibi (ad quem pertinet huius loci studia inspicere et judicare) potissimum offerrem, et pedibus tuis primum sujicerem, quicquid id fuerit, quod operor.

Itaque digneris, clementissime Praesul, suscipere has meas ineptias, atque ut omnes sciant, quam nihil audacter asseram, non solum permitto, sed etiam obsecro, ut reverenda Paternitas tua, arrepto calamo, quaecunque visum est, aboleat, aut igno facto totum comburat, mea prorsus nihil refert. Scio, quod Christus mea opera non eget, absque me nunciabit prospera Ecclesiae suae: quando secundum Gregorium Nazianzenum nec vera tutum est loqui in Ecclesia, praesertim gravibus peccatoribus.

Idcirco mei non oblitus, his verbis protestor, me disputare, non determinare. Disputo, inquam, non assero, ac disputo cum timore, non quod eorum bullas et minas timeam, qui nullo prorsus timore tacti, quicquid vel somniaverint, velut Evangelium credi volunt. Horum enim audacia et inscitia simul coegit (fateor) etiam timori meo non credere. Quae nisi tanta esset, nullus me praeterquam angulus meus cognovisset. Si opus ipsum non fuerit suum, omnino volo, ut nec sit meum, sit vero nihil et nullius: ego nihil debui quaerere, nisi ut nulli essem erroris occasio. Gloriam habeat ille solus, eius solius est, qui est benedictus in omnia saecula, Amen. Datum Sabbatho post Exaudi, anno MDXVIII.

F. Martinus Lutherus, August.

humility you even are revered and cherished nearly to the point of the danger of pontifical dignity (let adulation depart; not you, but I proclaim the gifts of Christ in you): it was most right, that especially to you (whom it concerns to examine and judge the zeal of this place) I should have presented, and first subject to your feet, whatever it will have been that I work.

And so, should you consider, most clement Prelate, to take up these ineptitudes of mine, all would know that I would boldly assert nothing; and I not only permit, but even implore, that your fatherly reverence, having taken hold of a pen, obliterate whatever it seems good to, or consume the whole in a kindled fire; what is mine matters entirely not. I know that Christ does not need my works, without me he will announce the triumph of his Church: since, according to Gregory of Nazianzus, it is not even safe to speak the truth in the Church, particularly for serious sinners.

Therefore, having not forgotten myself, I testify by these words, that I dispute and do not determine. I dispute, I say, not assert, and dispute with fear, not because I allegedly fear the bulls and threats of those, who, struck by no fear altogether, want to believe whatever they may have dreamed up, just as Gospel. For their audacity and ignorance have simultaneously forced me (I admit) to not even yield my fear. Which if this matter were not so great, no one would have become aware of me beyond my corner. If the work itself should not be His, I entirely wish that it would not be mine, truly that it would be nothing and no one's: I was obliged to strive for nothing else than to be an occasion of error to no one. May He alone have glory, it is of Him alone, who is blessed in all ages, Amen. Sabbath after Exaudi [seventh Sunday of Easter] in the year 1518.[14]

Bro. Martin Luther, Augustinian.

[14] On the date, see above.